NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0537 APRIL 8, 1976
LASZLO DOSA

FACING UP TO FLU

ANNCR:

PRESIDENT FORD HAS ASKED CONGRESS TO APPROPRIATE FUNDS FOR THE MASS PRODUCTION OF A VACCINE TO INOCULATE ALL AMERICANS AGAINST A POTENTIALLY VERY DANGEROUS STRAIN OF INFLUENZA. VOA SCIENCE EDITOR LASZLO DOSA PREPARED THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, A MASSIVE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC, CALLED THE SPANISH FLU, SWEPT THE WORLD, KILLING TWENTY-MILLION PEOPLE. IN A TWO-MONTH PERIOD OF THE YEAR 1918, ONE-QUARTER OF ALL SOLDIERS IN THE UNITED STATES WERE HOSPITALIZED WITH INFLUENZA, AND SEVERAL THOUSAND OF THEM DIED. THOUSANDS OF AMERICAN CIVILIANS DIED TOO.

IN LATE JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, DOCTORS AT THE UNITED STATES ARMY'S FORT DIX, NEAR NEW YORK CITY, BECAME CONCERNED WHEN AN EXTRAORDINARILY LARGE NUMBER OF ARMY RECRUITS HAD TO BE HOSPITALIZED FOR RESPIRATORY DISEASE. THIS EPISODE COINCIDED WITH A MINOR INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC WHICH WAS SWEEPING THE COUNTRY AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME.

THIS YEAR'S EPIDEMIC WAS CAUSED BY THE SO CALLED A-VICTORIA VIRUS. BUT THE ARMY DOCTORS -- ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT FOR NEW STRAINS OF THE FREQUENTLY CHANGING INFLUENZA VIRUS -- SENT CULTURE SPECIMENS FROM THE THROATS OF THEIR MILITARY PATIENTS TO PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORIES AND TO THE WALTER REED ARMY MEDICAL CENTER IN WASHINGTON.

IN A MATTER OF DAYS, THE LABORATORIES ESTABLISHED THAT IN SEVERAL CASES AT FORT DIX, THE INFLUENZA WAS CAUSED BY THE SO CALLED "SWINE VIRUS" AND NOT THE A-VICTORIA STRAIN. THE CLINICAL SYMPTOMS OF THE TWO KINDS OF INFLUENZA ARE INDISTINGUISHABLE, BUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN VACCINATED AGAINST A-VICTORIA ARE NOT PROTECTED AGAINST THE POTENTIALLY MORE DANGEROUS SWINE VIRUS.

THE SWINE VIRUS, AS ITS NAME SUGGESTS, IS COMMON AMONG PIGS. USUALLY, IT DOES NOT GO FROM SWINE TO MEN, BUT ONCE HUMANS CONTRACT IT, THE VIRUS SPREADS EASILY FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER BY WAY OF SUSPENDED PARTICLES -- AEROSOLS -- IN THE AIR WE EXHALE.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH DOCTORS HAVE FOUND THAT THE BODY DEVELOPS ANTIGENS (NATURAL DEFENSES) TO COMBAT THE SWINE VIRUS NEARLY IDENTICAL TO THE ANTIGENS CARRIED BY THE SURVIVORS OF THE GREAT SPANISH FLU EPIDEMIC MORE THAN HALF-A-CENTURY AGO. AND IT WAS THROUGH THIS COMMON ANTIGEN THAT THEY WERE ABLE TO ESTABLISH A LINK BETWEEN THE SPANISH FLU AND THE SWINE INFLUENZA. AT THE TIME OF THE SPANISH FLU, THE SCIENCE OF VIROLOGY HAD NOT YET REACHED THE STAGE WHERE THE FLU-CAUSING VIRUSES MIGHT HAVE BEEN ISOLATED. SO NOBODY KNOWS JUST WHAT THAT WORLD WAR ONE VIRUS WAS LIKE, EXCEPT THAT ITS ANTIGENS WERE APPARENTLY THE SAME AS THOSE OF THE SWINE INFLUENZA VIRUS.

NOBODY IN THE POPULATION UNDER THE AGE OF FIFTY-FIVE HAS THE ANTIGEN PROTECTION AGAINST THE SPANISH FLU, OR AGAINST SWINE INFLUENZA. DOCTORS PRESUME -- BUT ARE NOT ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN -- THAT OLDER PEOPLE ARE PROTECTED. BUT IN ANY EVENT, PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTS BELIEVE THAT THE UNITED STATES WOULD BE TAKING UNDUE RISKS IF IT DID NOT EMBARK ON A MASSIVE VACCINATION PROGRAM.

(OPT) DOCTOR FRANKLIN TOP, CHIEF OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VIRUS DISEASES AT WALTER REED ARMY MEDICAL CENTER, TOLD NEWSMEN THAT HE DOES NOT AGREE WITH SCIENTISTS, SUCH AS DOCTOR GERALD EDELMAN, THE NOBEL PRIZE WINNING PROFESSOR AT ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY, WHO SAID THAT THE MONEY SHOULD BE SPENT ON VIRUS RESEARCH RATHER THAN VIRUS VACCINES. ACCORDING TO DOCTOR TOP, HISTORICAL EVIDENCE SHOWS THAT EVEN A MILD VIRUS CAN BECOME VIRULENT. HE THINKS THE EXPERIENCE WITH THE SPANISH FLU SUGGESTS THAT THE THREAT OF SWINE INFLUENZA SHOULD BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. (END OPT)

WJL/RCS